

## Trickster's Way

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## ***The Aztec Trickster On Display: The Darkest Side***

**Terry Stocker**

**INTRODUCTION :** Shortly after the Spanish conquered the Aztecs, Fray Bernardino de Sahagún compiled a 12-volume ethnography, *General History of the Things of New Spain* or *Florentine Codex*. It is one of the world's most valuable archaeological documents, providing a stunning view into the Aztecs' polytheistic religion with Tezcatlipoca, the trickster, at the top. Tezcatlipoca demanded human sacrifice and cannibalism. The living representative of Tezcatlipoca was a captive/slave raised from childhood to act the part. At the end of each year he was sacrificed and another captive/slave replaced him. For one year he walked, brilliantly attired, throughout the capital city playing his flute, encountering and impressing adults and children with specific rhetoric ingrained in him from childhood. Four stewards accompanied him. He was the trickster on display.

Yet the trickery involved in Tezcatlipoca's existence was not limited to the Aztec worldview. An understanding of Aztec society was rendered somewhat chaotic by the Spanish's imposition of a Christian worldview of demonic and divine in which the Aztec god Quetzalcoatl was infused with Christ-like qualities, including revival/redemption. (See Stocker 2001.) Three hundred years later, anthropologists, with Christian backgrounds, continued the distortion with elements sometimes bordering on comic not cosmic.

This paper deconstructs, Spanish and anthropological distortions, allowing readers/viewers to come closer to the actual Aztec cosmos in which the trickster ruled.

### **BACKGROUND**

The god Tezcatlipoca, who demanded human sacrifice, and Quetzalcoatl, who demanded only animal sacrifice, fought in the legendary city of Tollan (Tula, Hidalgo, Mexico) almost 400 years before the Aztecs came to power. (Stocker 1993) Tezcatlipoca won, and Quetzalcoatl was banished from Tula. Quetzalcoatl's vowing to return and restore his cult is a Spanish/Catholic fabrication and in later "scholastic" additions to the tale, such as Nicholson's (1971:109), Quetzalcoatl built a second Tollan in the Yucatan at Chichén Itzá. (See Gillepsie 1989:xii.)

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The Aztecs had two public schools. The Calmecac, was for the training of priests, and the priests dressed as Quetzalcoatl. Even though their god advocated only sacrificing animals, they were obligated to comply with the demands of the winning god. They sacrificed humans. The other school, the Tepochcali, was for the training of warriors. It was these warriors who constantly went to battle to obtain slaves and sacrificial victims.

Two points need addressing: First, most analyses of Aztec religion has focused on Quetzalcoatl since he was the bearded white-like God who—with Spanish overlay—would return and his return was/is correlated with Cortez's arrival in Mexico. We have a plethora of works on Quetzalcoatl, but only a few on Tezcatlipoca (Hunt 1977, Barjau 1991, Stocker 1993, 2002). The second point is the documented annihilations by the Aztecs in which they took the children captives (Stocker 1984, 1988). There is minimal data as to how captives, beyond being sacrificed, were treated or disposed of. However, I (Stocker n.d.) have described that by depriving a child of linguistic communication he or she would be little more than a trained animal, fit for specific manual jobs, and willingly (unknowingly) be led up a pyramid for sacrifice.

In *A Walk Through An Aztec Dream* Tezcatlipoca is "fleshed" out for all to see (Stocker 2002). The following quotes are modified from Sahagún. I used many versions of his works, but the most accessible for the English reader are Dibble and Anderson's.

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Figure 1. Tezcatlipoca, the Aztec trickster, represented in changing forms. A (2) the night axe. B (5) the towering man. C (6) the dwarf female. D (7) the corpse in funeral wrapping

### TRICKSTER

Every day, humans try to act in accordance with the legal and moral laws of their society. But as so often happens, some laws are broken. In many cases of moral ineptitude, the problem is thought to lie not with any person but rather with an

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outside perpetrator, a trickster. For Christians, the devil is the trickster. For the Aztecs it was Tezcatlipoca.

Sahagun fully understood Tezcatlipoca's similarity to Satan.

We know in times past, everywhere here in New Spain, Tezcatlipoca was worshipped. They also named him Titlacauan, and Yaotl, Necoc Yaotl, Moyocoya, Necualpilli. This Tezcatlipoca, the ancients said, was a true god; his abode was everywhere—in the land of the dead, on earth, in heaven. When he walked upon the earth he quickened war; he quickened vice, filth; he brought anguish, affliction to men; he brought discord among men; wherefore he was called "the enemy on both sides." He mocked men; he ridiculed men. He was called wind, shadow. This wicked Tezcatlipoca, we know, is Lucifer, the great devil who there in the midst of Heaven, even in the beginning, began war, vice, filth. From there he was cast out, from there he fell. But he walked here upon earth deceiving men, tricking men. This Tezcatlipoca Titlacauan is a great devil. The ancients worshipped him, and they celebrated his feast day in the month of Toxcatl, and they slew his representation, whom they named Titlacauan. So much were the ancients in confusion.

Tezcatlipoca was a trickster god, who had been elevated to the highest position in a polytheistic pantheon. Maybe the Aztecs are the only group in the world to have made the trickster the main god. Tezcatlipoca as a trickster was called different ways, like we interchange devil, Satan, Lucifer. We should note the peculiar masculinity of the Trickster. (Stocker 2001)

Tezcatlipoca's manifestations:

	MANIFESTATION		MEANING	
	Tezcatlipoca		Smoking Mirror	
	Titlacauan		We His Slaves	
	Telpochtli		Male Youth	
	Yaotl		Enemy	
	Moyocoyani		Maker of Himself	
	Omacatl		Two Reed	
	Itztli		Obsidian Blade	
	Ixquimilli		Eye-Bundle/Curved	
	Itzlacoliuhqui		Obsidian Blade	

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	Tepeyollotl		Hill Heart	
	Tecciztecatl		Conch Shell-Lord	
	Metztli		Moon	
	Chalchiuhtotolin		Jade [Precious] Turkey	

**OMENS**

Sahagún's *Book 5: The Omens* is the shortest of his books with only fifteen omens. Most of the omens take place at night, and Tezcatlipoca is the only deity to be presented as the trickster, and obviously as the trickster he changes form. (See Fig. 1) One time Tezcatlipoca is a bundle of ashes, other times a coyote, and on one occasion he becomes a skunk. And when the skunk sprayed, the Aztec said, "Tezcatlipoca breaketh wind." The epitome of Aztec omens, for me, is the night axe. (Iron arrows are a Spanish adaptation.)

It was well into the night when the night axe rang out for a great distance. Much did it frighten people. This night axe was Tezcatlipoca making sport and fun of people.

They said that he who looked upon it, one who was bold and wise, and not given to fright, of strong spirit, would call to it as a person. Then he hurled himself at it; he seized it and hung on to it. Or he followed at its back and forced himself on it so he could catch it and see what manner of omen his was.

And when he saw it, he beheld it like a man without a head, with a neck severed at the nape, and with a chest and belly broken open. Thus they said that which was heard was his chest when the halves met like a mouth opening and closing making a sucking sound.

And of this apparition he to whom it appeared, whether a priest or bold one, or reckless warrior, when he had succeeded in reaching and seeing it, then saw his heart. He seized it, clutched it, and took it tightly in his fist and tore it out. So he demanded what it would give, grant, or award him. Perhaps he demanded riches, captives, valor, poverty, or the hoe or tumpline. So it was said that all that was awarded him became his gift.

And if it spoke to him, it said, "O our friend, O humming bird, O warrior. What do you say to me? What will you have of me? Unhand me, and I will give you what you wish." At once did it address him, calling him by name.

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And the vassal to whom it appeared said, "I shall not let thee go, for I have taken thee."

Then it said to him, "Behold one thorn. I give it to you. Leave me alone."

The brave-hearted one didn't like this. He would only leave it if it gave him three or four thorns. Thus he showed and made evident that he went skillfully to war, not going forth in vain. As many captives as he would take as it showed and gave him thorns. Thus he then received as a reward all earthly happiness and contentment: flowers, tobacco, capes, lip pendants, head bands.

Also it was the common opinion, that whoever could not make it talk, immediately tore and ripped out its heart. He who had cut out its heart ran away. He buried it somewhere, wrapped it up thoroughly and tightly. Later, when it had dawned, he looked at it, and then it showed him if his fortune were good. When he saw a soft, white feather, or thorns, then it appeared that his lot would be good. But if he saw a piece of charcoal or a rag, it would not be good. Thus his reward had become poverty or misery.

Whosoever was not of strong spirit, the coward could not seize the specter. He was terrified. He could not pursue it. His body was flattened on the ground, and he could walk no more. So he knew that the night axe only made fun of him. Perchance sickness or death, or misery, slavery, and sin the specter gave him when it came upon him.

## PRAYERS

In Sahagún's *Rhetoric and Moral Philosophy*, many specific prayers to Tezcatlipoca are detailed, none to Quetzalcoatl. The ninth chapter contains the ruler's coronation message. He implores Tezcatlipoca to help him fulfill his mission. The first paragraph reads,

O master, O our lord, O lord of the near, of the nigh, O night, O wind, thou hast inclined thy heart. Perhaps thou hast mistaken me for another, I who am a commoner, a laborer. In excrement, in filth my life has been. I am unreliable; I am filth. I am an imbecile. Why? For what reason? It is perhaps my desert, my merit that thou takest me from the excrement, from the filth, that though placest me on the reed mat.

When the ruler died, the priest began a lengthy prayer to Tezcatlipoca with,

He is gone. Thou hast hidden him. Thou hast placed him underfoot. Thou hast placed him in retreat. He hath known our home, the place of no outlets,



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the place with no openings. Now he lieth resting; he knows the so-called place of no fleas.

Chapter six relates a prayer that the principal priest (who presumably represented Quetzalcoatl) would pray to Tezcatlipoca to request that a bad ruler might die.

O master, O our lord, O lord of the near of the nigh, O night, O wind: thou seest, thou knowest the things within the trees, the rocks. And thou knowest of things within us. Thou hearest us from within. Thou hearest, thou knowest that which is within us: what we say, what we think, our minds, our hearts. Smoke and mist arise before thee.

## CAPTIVES

Initial surrender was rarely an option for a group the Aztecs were about to attack. Why? The Aztecs needed more than just tribute; they needed captives for sacrifice, an ongoing theme in *Florentine Codex*. In *Kings and Lords*, Sahagún details the arduous demands on a boy whose family wanted him to become a judge.

And behold how the young boy's life began. While still small, his hair was shorn. When he was ten, they let a tuft of hair grow on the back of his head. By fifteen the tuft became long. This was when he had not taken captives.

If he took a captive with the aid of two or three others, the lock of hair was removed. And thus the captive was divided into parts. The first, who was the real captor, took his body and one of his thighs--the one with the right foot. The second took the left thigh. The third took the right upper arm, and so on.

## AZTEC 260-DAY AUGURY TABLE

The function of Tezcatlipoca as trickster is also manifest in the Aztecs 260-day augury table. (Stocker 1999) The day 1 Death in the Aztec 260-day augury table was dedicated to Tezcatlipoca.

1 Death was the day sign of the slaves, whose dwelling places were by the hones for sharpening and the grinding stones. No slave-owner scolded or abused slaves when they learned that the morrow would be the day sign of Tezcatlipoca.

Tezcatlipoca was a rationale for the institution of slavery in Aztec society. On



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certain days, some elites sacrificed slaves. The date 1 Death belonged to the god, Tezcatlipoca, who demanded human sacrifice. Of the slaves, Sahagún was told, "...the slaves were like the blue cotingas, the trupials, the precious birds of Tezcatlipoca."

It appears from Sahagún's descriptions that one of the slaves' jobs was grinding. Grinding a stone ax to razor sharpness would have been arduous but not requiring any specific skill—something a slave could have done.

A special naming ceremony was held for a child born on the day 1 Death.

Small children performed the naming ceremony. If it was a boy, they named him Miquiz, or Yaotl, Cenyaotl, Necoc Yaotl, Chicoyaotl, or Yaomauitl. So they placed on him a name of Tezcatlipoca. Of this name it was said, 'None may wish him harm; none may wish him to die.' If anyone should wish death on someone born on the day 1 Death, the perpetrator would sicken and die.

Here, we are talking the power of indoctrination. The day 1 Death was like Christmas for Christians. The children performed the naming ceremony on this day. One can only imagine that day was forever impressed upon the minds of the children performing the naming ceremony.

### HIMSELF

In Sahagún's *Ceremonies* it clearly states that the Tezcatlipoca impersonator was selected from captives. The fifth month, Toxcatl, was Tezcatlipoca's celebration. At the end of this month the impersonator who had lived for one year, like Tezcatlipoca, was sacrificed, and at this time another impersonator was selected to live like Tezcatlipoca for one year.

About ten impersonators were living in various places, all guarded by stewards. These impersonators were selected when captives were taken. Those selected had to be of suitable fair body. One of those chosen was of fair countenance, of good understanding, quick, of clean body, slender, reed-like, long and thin, like a stout cane, like a stone column all over, not of overfed body, not corpulent, nor very small, nor exceedingly tall. To be exceedingly tall was a defect. The women would say to him, 'Tall fellow; tree-shaker; star-gatherer.' An impersonator had to be without defect.

Imagine, in such a hallowed description of Tezcatlipoca's impersonator there was a shallow, humorous jab at what women might think of him.

Humor aside, ten impersonators were living in various places. Ten impersonators!

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They were captives! What a better way to get someone to conform to the ideals of Tezcatlipoca than to obtain a baby captive and raise the child to think he is a living representative of the main god.

Stewards guarded these captives. Presumably those stewards were the state's "ears" and "eyes." They would hear if anyone advocated Quetzalcoatl's cause of abandoning human sacrifice.

The impersonator was smooth-skinned, like a tomato, like a pebble, as if sculpted in wood. He had no pimples. He was not curly-haired; his hair was straight and long. His forehead was not rough or tomato-shaped or baglike. The back of his head was not pointed. His head was without bumps; he was not broad-headed, not rectangular headed, not bald. He did not have swollen eyes or swollen cheeks; he was not of gross-face; he did not have a nose with wide nostrils; he was not Roman-nosed, not bent-nosed, not crooked-nosed; but his nose was straight and averagely placed. He was not thick-lipped or bowl-lipped; he was not ring-tongued. He did not speak a barbarous language; he did not lisp; he was not dumb. He was not buck-toothed, yellow-toothed, fang-toothed or rotten-toothed; his teeth were like seashells; they were in order. He was not of poor vision; he was not small-eyed or cup-eyed; he was not bruised eyed or yellow-eyed. He did not have a scarred neck, or choked neck; his neck was not lacerated, or double-chinned, or swollen. Nor was he large-eared or long-eared. He was not stiff-necked, rigid-necked, twisted-necked, wry-necked or crook-necked. He was not emaciated; he was not fat; he was not big-bellied. His navel did not protrude; it was not hatched-shaped. His stomach was not wrinkled or shrunken. He was not cringing. His buttock was not hatchet-shaped or flabby. He was not of flabby thighs.

The Roman-nose is a dead give-away of Spanish influence.

For him who was thus, who had no flaw, who had no bodily defects, who had no blemish, who had no mark, who had no warts, no small tumor; the greatest care was taken that he be taught to blow the flute and whistle. He would hold flowers and his smoking tube. At the same time he would go playing the flute, he would go sucking the smoking tube, he would go smelling the flowers.

And while yet he lived, while he was being trained by a steward, before he appeared before the people, great care was taken that he should be very circumspect in his discourse, that he talk graciously, that he greet people agreeably on the road if he met anyone.

One can only imagine the impact on a young Aztec child having a chance encounter with Tezcatlipoca's living embodiment.

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He was greatly honored when he appeared as an impersonator of Tezcatlipoca. He was indeed regarded as our lord. There was the assigning of lordship; he was importuned; he was sighed for; there was bowing before him; the commoners performed the earth-eating ceremony before him.

And if they saw that his body fattened a little, the stewards made him take brine; with it they thinned him and he became firm and hard.

And for one year he thus lived. At the time of Toxcatl, he appeared before the people, and at that time they sacrificed him, he who had been led along the road. Then he was replaced from among all whom the various stewards were guarding, were maintaining.

Tezcatlipoca appeared before all the people. They saw him willingly walk up the steps and willingly be sacrificed. In Aztec society, the trickster was on display. We can only assume that he practiced walking up the steps many times, being laid back and told that one day he would do this before a large group of people.

Thereupon he began his office. He went about playing the flute. By day and by night he followed whatever way he wished.

His eight servitors went following him. And also there were four constables, masters of youths to accompany him.

At this time King Moctezuma adorned the impersonator; he repeatedly adorned him; he gave him gifts; he arrayed him with great pomp. He had all costly things placed on him, verily he took him to be his beloved god, Tezcatlipoca.

The Aztec king didn't array just anyone. Tezcatlipoca was special. This was total mind control. (I want to go back in time and see this.) They controlled his diet with brine and they controlled his mind, from birth. The captive thinks he's Tezcatlipoca and so does the king. Who didn't believe it? Who wasn't tricked?

The impersonator fasted; hence it was said: 'He fasteth in black,' because he went with his face smoke-black. His head was pasted with eagle down. They only covered his hair for him; it fell to his loins. And when he was attired, he went about with popcorn flowers laid upon his head; they were his crown. And from his ears hung

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curved golden shell pendants. And they fitted his ears with turquoise ear plugs, turquoise mosaic. And a shell necklace was his necklace. Moreover, his breast ornament was of white seashells.

His lip pendant, his slender lip pendant, was of snail shell. And down his back hung the cord bag called icpatoxin.

On both upper arms he wore golden bracelets, on both wrists turquoise bracelets taking up almost all his forearms. And he went putting on only his net cape like a fish net of wide mesh with a fringe of brown cotton thread. And his costly breechclout reached the calves of his legs. He placed bells on both sides, on his legs, bells of gold, called oyoalli. And his obsidian sandals had ocelot skin ears. Thus was arrayed he who would die after one year. When the feast of Toxcatl drew near he married; he looked upon a woman.

And he shed, he put in various places, he abandoned what had been his ornaments in which he had walked about fasting in black. His hair was shorn except a tuft of hair upon his forehead, like that of a seasoned warrior. They bound it; they wound it round and round with brown cotton thread called tochyacatl; it was tied with a slipknot. And his forked heron feather ornament with a quetzal feather spray they bound to his warrior's hairdressing.

For twenty days he lived lying with the women. The four women in whose company he lived had also lived for a year guarded in the steward's establishment. The name of the first one was Xochiquetzal; the second was Xilonen; the third was Atlatonan; the fourth was Uixtociuatl.

This is how they got more baby slaves. And Xochiquetzal, his first consort, was the number one represented goddess. She is the most represented goddess among the figurines from Tula, HGO (Edwards and Stocker 2001). And how many baby slaves were born yearly from this group of select representatives and female consorts? Fifty women were guarded for becoming the representatives.

Five days from the feast of Toxcatl, they began to sing and dance. In the next five days, one knew nothing more of Moctezuma. They who yet had been Tezcatlipoca's companions provided people with food, provided people with favors. On the first day they sang and danced at a place called Tecanman. On the second day it was in the home of the steward who guarded the image of Titlacauan. On the third day it was at Tepetzinco, in the middle of the lagoon. The fourth time it was at Tepepulco.

When they had sung and danced, thereupon he embarked in a boat. The women went, going with him. They went consoling him; they went

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encouraging him. The boat proceeded to a place called Acaquilpan or Caualtepec; there it proceeded to the shore; there it landed them.

For here they were left, rather near Tlapitzauhcan. The women then returned. And only they who for the time had become and were his servitors went following him while yet he lived.

When he arrived where he was to die, a small temple called Tlacoachcalco stood, he ascended by himself of his own free will. Climbing the steps, he shattered his flutes and whistles.

And when he had risen to the summit, then the offering priests seized him. They threw him upon his back on the sacrificial stone; then one of them cut open his breast; pulled out his heart, and raised it in dedication to the sun. But his body was not rolled down; rather, four men carried it.

His severed head was strung on the skull rack. Thus he was brought to an end in the adornment in which he lived.

And this betokened our life on earth. For he who rejoiced, who possessed riches, who sought, who esteemed our lord's sweetness, his fragrance--richness, prosperity--thus ended in great misery. Indeed it was said: "No one on earth went exhausting happiness, riches, wealth."

### SUMMARY

The Aztecs made mardi gras look ordinary. Every day of the year in some neighborhood, the Aztecs were ritualizing. How does one even begin to compare the Aztecs to our great American society? The main American show is one million Santas begging for money every year at Christmas. In either case, the bottom line is mind control and economics.

One thing is for certain: in present-day parlance, we'd say, "The Tezcatlipoca cult walked the talk." They put someone in the streets conforming to the ideology they were espousing. That someone was going to be sacrificed once a year.

Whatever we wonder, we can conclude that the Aztecs put the trickster on display: the darkest side.

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